LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

eastern Agenda

Newsletter from Andrew Duff MEP

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Adjusting the sights

Andrew joins in a woodwork class at Cambridge Regional College, helping NEETs to a better future

Big changes are afoot in the European Union and in Britain's relations with it. Adjust your sights.

There is kind of an agreement to bail out the Spanish banks and ease the burden on the Spanish taxpayer. Greece will default again soon. Italy is in trouble as the vital reforms of Mario Monti are beginning to stall. As the markets go quiet over the summer, people are holding their breath. Everyone knows that the size of the bail-out fund, the European Stability Mechanism, is too small for what it might be called on to do.

The autumn political season will be white hot. The European Commission is coming up with proposals to create a *banking union* – which means putting the eurozone banks under the strict supervision of the European Central Bank, ending weak national regulation. There will be a bank deposit guarantee scheme and machinery for restructuring riskier banks and closing down the worst.

By October there will be plans for *fiscal union* – which means that taxpayers across the eurozone will have to assume joint and several liability for a portion of national debt. This will be realised in some form by eurobonds.

By December - wait for it - we are promised plans for *political union*, which implies giving shape to a new form of federal economic government accountable to the European Parliament.

All this, if stitched together well and properly prepared, will not only salvage the euro but transform the European Union into something which, traditionally, the Liberal Democrats would be able to welcome.

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
Alliance des Démocrates et des Libéraux pour l'Europe

IN THIS ISSUE ...

P.1 Adjusting the Sights

P.3 Opportunities in 2013-14

P.4 Universities; Polling

P.5 Staying In

P.6 Doing a stage in Brussels

P.8 East of England grows

But not for Britain

The snag lies in the unequivocal decision of David Cameron not to let Britain be a part of this federal union. There are echoes here of Mrs Thatcher's 'No! No! No!', but the long-term consequences for Britain's membership of the EU are more profound. Already British MEPs are being asked why they should continue to vote on laws which will not concern the UK. The prospect of a two-tier Parliament is starting to emerge.

There is push and pull. Most of the Tory party will be more than happy with a solution which leaves the UK as an officially semi-detached member of the EU. William Hague has launched a white paper exercise to review the balance of competences between the EU and the UK. This unilateral exercise is being seen in Brussels, correctly, as the first step in drawing up a catalogue of demands to repatriate powers and to deconstruct the nexus of primary and secondary law which binds the UK into the Union.

The result of this review, which has not been blocked by Lib Dem ministers, will not be published until the end of 2014 – after the next elections to the European Parliament but just before the anticipated start of the constitutional Convention which will meet to codify federal union. Devastatingly, however, individual ministries will publish the results of their internal review of EU competence one by one, as they complete them. So the coalition has stored up for itself – and us – a good deal of trouble.

In short, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion than that the European policy of this government is in a terrible mess. As the rest of Europe pools sovereignty to be stronger together, Britain runs in the opposite direction. Savour this one sentence from Mr Hague's white paper: 'The Government is committed to playing a leading role in the EU and protecting the UK's sovereignty'.

The EU reacts

Our partners are incredulous. Georg Boomgaarden, the German Ambassador to Britain, warned recently: 'Some people in the UK seem to dream of getting a price for graciously offering to stay inside the EU if they are allowed to opt out of everything in substance. This is an illusion: there is no price tag for keeping the UK in the EU under the premise of cherry-picking'.

The danger is that even the single market, which the UK purports to like, will unravel if Britain pursues its current reckless policy. The City of London is acutely aware that it will be at a disadvantage if its own eurozone operations are not subject to the discipline of the EU's new banking union. Keeping financial services as a key element of the single market is in everyone's best interest, and that can only be achieved if the UK realises its interdependence on the EU and engages fully with it. The UK can expect no favours if it does not. It is unacceptable for the British to claim a decisive vote on sensitive EU matters when it does not contribute politically or financially.

Boomgaarden again: 'There cannot be a premium for non-participation, which would discriminate against those who gave up sovereignty for the common good. ... It would be helpful if Britain develops a clear idea about what its role in the future of Europe shall be. If it wants to leave there are no reasons for the others to care about the British role. But if this is not the case then a stable new arrangement is only possible if those who want a somewhat looser union do not hinder the efforts of others for deeper integration'.

British Liberal Democrats in the European Parliament, and the party more generally, find themselves on the horns of an uncomfortable dilemma. I am committed, at least, to trying to make Europe's federal experiment work as well as possible in the hope that it will in the end become more of an appealing option for the British people.

Lib Dem Opportunities in 2013-14

Paul Westlake, chair of campaigns, East of England Liberal Democrats

In May 2013 there will be county council elections across most of the region. Before then, this November, there are the elections for the new Police and Crime Commissioners – a contest which, where the Lib Dems stand a candidate, should be integrated into the county campaign. East of England county councils are 100% Tory and spectacularly badly run, so there's plenty to get stuck into. Recent experience (notably in Chelmsford North, where we held our Essex county seat with swings to us from the Tories *and* Labour) shows that we still win elections if we work harder and smarter.

Chelmsford Lib Dems celebrate two by-election wins against the Tories on 28 June. New Cllrs Stephen Robinson and Paul Bentham at front

Finding out what people think by knocking on their door with a short survey is not only a good way to explore voting intentions but also a valuable part of the democratic process. Most people are pleased to be asked for their opinions and happy to leave the completed survey hanging out of their letterbox for collection in half an hour. There is never enough time to knock on every door between January and April, so if you want to win next May, start surveying now! Let me know if you need a survey template to get started.

Campaigning on issues that matter to people is what Liberal Democrats do best. That's why we should be proud of our record in government. We have achieved a great deal since May 2010, much more than keeping the worst excesses of the Tories at bay. We have introduced additional funding for the poorest school pupils, taken hundreds of thousands of people out of tax and cut the tax bill for millions of low earners. We have introduced a billion pound scheme to help young people get into work and training and delivered the biggest pension increase ever. Under our influence the government is embarking on the largest investment in railways since the Victorian era.

We have done all this while cutting the deficit by 25% and saving the British economy from the worst consequences of worldwide recession. We're taking action to sort out the banks, where Labour admit they failed; Labour also admit they'd have had to make deep cuts too. These are achievements in government we need to be trumpeting. We shouldn't apologise for the fact that we had to work with another political party to deliver them.

A good set of county results in 2013 is important in itself. It is also a great launch pad for the elections to the European Parliament in 2014. Half our exports are to the European Union, whose rules on trade inevitably have a huge impact on British jobs. It is far better to be inside the EU leading the case for its much-needed reform, than to be an impotent outsider like Switzerland. You've got to be in it to win it!

Our Euro campaign will be about making the EU work for you – 'In Europe, On Your Side'. That's why you should always include Andrew Duff MEP as part of your Focus team in your leaflets.

Whenever you have a council election, you should be writing to EU citizens. They are entitled to vote in local and European elections and are flagged in Connect and EARS. Contact Tim Huggan in Andrew's office if you'd like a specimen letter to adapt for your campaign.

The recent debacle over Lords reform shows that the Conservative Party – our major opponent in this region – is in a state of disarray. As the European elections approach in 2014, Conservative in-fighting will grow ever more visible to voters. We Lib Dems have great opportunities over the next three years. Let's take them!

westlakejones@ntlworld.com @PJWestlake on Twitter

University successes

Andrew went campaigning in the recent (successful) referendum campaign in Ireland on the fiscal compact treaty

In otherwise overcast weather, the region's universities and research institutes continue to succeed.

Special congratulations to Essex on ranking 20th in the world for universities founded less than fifty years ago (Times Higher Education). The University of Essex at Colchester now has students from 130 countries, and scores well in terms of teaching, research and income from industry. Its new campus at Southend will be a great boon to that town.

Cambridge University continues to be used by Commission President José Manuel Barroso as a good example to emulate in the drive for excellence and competitiveness. It features, in fifth place, as the first European university in the Shanghai world rankings, and is joined only by Oxford and University College London in the top Shanghai 20. Cambridge receives €248m from the EU's R&D programme and takes part in 446 projects – third in rank behind the big French and German state run science bodies (and in front of Oxford at 6th, UCL 7th and Imperial 8th). All good reasons for keeping the EU budget large.

Meanwhile, Norwich scientists at the John Innes Centre have landed new funding of £6.2m from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to engineer a breakthrough in plant biology which could revolutionise farming in the developing world.

What we think

From time to time *eastern Agenda* reports on trends in public opinion drawn from the authoritative Eurobarometer polls. As we begin to gear up for the next European elections in 2014, here is some revealing data just released.

In general, knowledge about the Parliament grows: across EU27, 32% claim to be well informed (UK 39%).Look closer, however, and the picture gets more complicated. 36% still think MEPs sit in national delegations (UK 35%), and a large 21% don't know how they sit (UK 28%). 55% of EU27 are right to think that laws have to be passed both by the European Parliament and the Council (UK 47%). Yet only 58% know that MEPs are directly elected (UK 55%).

As the political crisis continues, there is a sharp fall in those who have a generally favourable impression of the Parliament. In EU27 it's only 26% (UK 12%), while an equal 26% have a negative opinion (UK 48%). In this poll, the UK was the outrider. Only 24% of the Brits polled declined to describe the Parliament as 'inefficient' (EU27 39%).

On what Parliament should be doing, social and economic policy unsurprisingly comes first. But there is also a strong increase in those who want Parliament to do more in the field of foreign, security and defence policies – presumably a reaction to the Arab spring and mixed feelings of anticipation and helplessness as watch events unfolding in Afghanistan, Syria and Palestine.

Nobody says the European Union is perfect, but ...

Staying In: the economics

1. The UK economy benefits from the EU's single market of over 500 million people to the tune of £90bn per year – that's £3300 per household.
2. Over half our trade is with the EU, and over half the UK's foreign direct investment comes from the EU.
3. The EU is trying to liberalise in other areas such as energy supply, digital services and green technology, adding more dimensions to the single market.
4. British people can live and work elsewhere in the EU without restriction: 2.2 million Brits do so.
5. EU policy has driven down prices, for instance roaming charges, and installed high levels of food standards, animal welfare and product regulation.
6. The EU has the clout to negotiate large free trade agreements worldwide, recently with South Korea. India, Japan, Canada and Latin American agreements are now under negotiation. Potential total benefit to the UK from EU trade policy is £12.5bn annually.
7. The EU is the world leader in combating climate change, setting ambitious binding targets for carbon reduction through to 2050.
8. Life at the work place, especially for women and the low-paid has been greatly helped over the years by EU labour law.

Staying In: the politics

1. EU policy in justice and home affairs brings us more security and helps fight crime.
2. The EU's Frontex agency helps states control their external borders. More is planned to help share the burden over immigration and asylum policy.
3. The EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, now binding, sets world-class standards in rights protection and civilised principles.
4. The development of EU common foreign and security policies enlarges British influence and projects European values of democracy and the rule of law.
5. The EU working together applies effective sanctions to Iran, Syria, Burma and Zimbabwe.
6. The EU is the world's biggest donor of development aid, fighting disease and corruption especially in Africa.
7. The EU's common security and defence missions complement NATO in trouble spots such as Kosovo and Somalia.
8. EU membership enhances our democracy and broadens our horizons. Having Brits at work in the Parliament and Council in Brussels is good for both the national and European interest.

Joining Up

And if the EU is so rotten why are other countries queuing up to join? Croatia comes next year. Accession negotiations with Iceland will conclude soon.

Taking the boy out of St Albans

Ed Walkington reflects on his three-month internship in Andrew's Brussels office

1) The EU works

I had always suspected that behind the British media portrayal of an ineffectual, opaque, byzantine bureaucracy there might be a reasonably competent legislative procedure, and indeed this has proven to be the case. Legislation is proposed by the Commission, undergoes scrutiny and amendment in parliament committees and in plenary, and is passed on to the Council for further scrutiny from a Member State perspective, returning to the Parliament if necessary. It's all rather simple, and generally it works rather well (indeed, as an American friend working here told me, rather better than the US Federal government). It's so easy to bash the EU, but from what I've seen this isn't at all deserved.

2) The Commission is not the bogeyman

Another media leitmotif is the image of the Commission as an overly complex, slow-moving machine, endlessly churning out incomprehensible regulations drafted by bureaucratic trolls who never see the light of day, much less the needs of citizens. But I have been impressed by how eager the Commission is to work with the Parliament and by the calibre of Commission employees. It's true that they don't always speak the language of the layperson and sometimes proposals don't consider the needs of citizens as thoroughly as perhaps they might. But this is why we have the Parliament: to amend proposals and keep them relevant. The real bogeyman is the Council, where narrow nationalistic self-interest often blocks sensible Commission proposals approved by a majority of the Parliament. The move away from unanimity voting means no one state can veto legislation in many areas, but too many decisions in the Council are taken behind closed doors, with very little transparency, in stark contrast to the Parliament where all plenary votes, documents and amendments are published, and even committee meetings are usually broadcast live.

3) The acronym-mania reputation is well-deserved

Recently I responded to casework letters on the withdrawal of MAR for APCs who haven't ratified EPAs, removing DFQF, although LDCs will remain in the GSP... The acronyms are ubiquitous, and do not always seem especially sensible (AFET for foreign affairs committee baffled me for weeks). Although English is the main working language in the Parliament (which makes you wonder what would happen should the UK ever leave), I've had to learn a whole new dialect - Commissionese - and one of the great challenges to pro-Europeans is to translate this into plain English. The EU institutions are generally transparent about what they are doing and why - a vast array of documentation is published every day - but it is not published in an English understandable to the layperson. And when people can't understand something, they tend to oppose it.

4) The EU is a remarkable set of institutions

It hits you when you're sat around a table with Italians, Poles, Germans, a half-Ukrainian half-French girl and a Dutchman, discussing (in English, of course) everything from the eurocrisis to Euro 2012: European integration really is remarkable. Nations that traditionally have been at war with their neighbours, less than twenty years ago in the case of new member state Croatia, sit down and work together, drink together, joke together. On Thursday evenings the entire Parliament disgorges onto Place Luxembourg, a bar-lined plaza that temporarily becomes an international mini street festival. The EU has also created a faintly terrifying breed of post-national citizens: I've met second and even third generation Eurocrats, who learnt two languages from each of their bilingual parents, while speaking English with their friends. My perfunctory knowledge of German and rudimentary French rather pales in comparison...

5) The Parliament is surprisingly similar to Hogwarts

Externally, the European Parliament buildings are gargantuan, awe-strikingly ugly postmodern lumps, but inside there's much more in common with the Houses of Parliament than one might expect, with long winding passages and secret shortcuts aplenty if you can remember which unlabelled door to open. Different lifts miss out different floors, floor numbers change as you move between buildings, and getting a replacement printer toner involves a trek up and down several lifts, across bridges, and navigating a warren of windowless corridors. The first time it took me an hour to find, and half an hour to return... The different political groups occupy, like Hogwarts houses, different towers in the buildings, with UKIP's EFD group, like Slytherin, being tucked away down a grimy passage, presumably near the dungeons. Another Harry Potter-esque feature is floor 5½, the location of the ALDE secretariat, which like platform 9¾ must be approached clandestinely: walking to the back of a 'goods only' lift and pressing a solitary, very grubby button labelled 5.5.

6) Brussels is a beautiful, exciting city

The popular image of Brussels is an ugly, boring city - no doubt pictures of the Berlaymont and other EU monstrosities don't help this perception. But outside the EU quarters Brussels is charming and rather beautiful. The central square in the old town is nothing short of spectacular, while the Flemish townhouses in the hilly suburbs create a wonderful cityscape. The Belgian kings re-ordered vast rafts of the city, constructing ever more grandiose monuments to their young country, which are certainly impressive. Away from these, the narrow lanes of the Marolles boast arty shops and alternative clubs to rival Spitalfields, and flea markets to rival Istanbul. In short, it's a city definitely worth visiting. If you can stand the ugly architecture, I'd even recommend visiting the parliament, where a new, free visitor's centre, the Parlamentarium, provides an excellent look at the how, what and why of European integration.

7) Brussels is also not as friendly as it first appears

My wallet was stolen, Sunday at midday at a cafe on a fairly busy road. Almost everyone staying here for a long time has faced something similar; a spate of burglaries seems to affect workers in the EU institutions more than most. And the Belgian police, like many things Belgian, aren't the most efficient operation.

8) UKIP really are as bad as they appear

Rarely in the parliament, frequently missing committee meetings and even plenary sessions, and most frustratingly of all telling constituents they are working hard on an issue when they haven't attended the relevant committee for years, the UKIP MEPs are a complete waste of space in the Parliament. The speeches in plenary tend to be the same europhobic rants, regardless of the matter discussed. One UKIP MEP simply votes 'no' on everything, which I guess saves him the time of reading each report. The greatest shame is that the UK loses out on a potential 12 hard working MEPs.

9) Andrew is a twitter fiend

Working in Andrew's office involved becoming an expert on all things twitter, and quickly. MEPs face a difficult job in being so far removed from their constituents, but the advent of social media can change this. Andrew tweets daily on what he is working on and also his opinions on all matters European. And unlike many politicians, he writes all his own tweets. Follow him: @Andrew_Duff_MEP.

VoteWatch.eu

An interesting on-line tool to learn more about who does what in the EU is www.votewatch.eu. Here MEP most closely matches your views. And see how the UK government votes in Council.

Up until now, it's the British who vote against the majority most often, and they and the Germans who vote against each other most often. France and Lithuania always vote with the majority.

Recent visits around the region included Norwich Airport, Redwings Horse Sanctuary (with horse), Ely railway station (with Lindsay Harris), and The Higgins Bedford art gallery (with Mayor Dave Hodgson)

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The East of England grows

The total resident population of the region has grown to 5847 million, an increase of 446,000 since 2001. This makes us the fastest growing region in the UK after London and the South East. Of that growth, 56% is the result of migration (including immigration). So says the preliminary results of last year's census.

The local authorities with fastest growing population in the East of England are Peterborough and Uttlesford, with 16.6% and 15.1% respectively. Tendring, meanwhile, lost 0.6% of its population. In terms of new households, Fenland grew by 16.0%, South Cambs 15.4%, East Cambs 15.3%, Watford 14.7% and Ipswich 14.6%.

We are getting older. 17.5% of the region is aged 65 or more: in North Norfolk 28.7%.

In terms of population density, since you ask, England has 407 people per hectare compared with Holland at 493 and Belgium at 361. A hectare is the size of the rugby pitch at Twickenham. France has only 103 people per rugby pitch; Finland only 18 (the rest are trees).

eastern Agenda **is the newsletter of Andrew Duff MEP for all Liberal Democrats in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk — the East of England.**

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